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THE BOOKE OF SIR THOMAS MOORE:  
AN INTERPRETATION IN THE LIGHT OF ITS  
SOURCES AND PROBABLE OCCASION

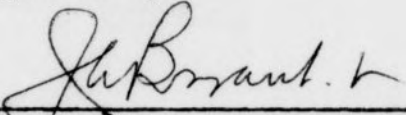
by

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Discussions of The Booke of Sir Thomas Moore have centered primarily on three problems: whether Shakespeare actually wrote parts of it, when it was written, and whether it was ever produced. My paper attempts to discuss the play from three different viewpoints.

One problem concerns the question of why people in Elizabethan England would be interested in Sir Thomas More. Several possible answers can be determined. During the late sixteenth century there was much dissatisfaction with the organization of the Anglican Church which lead to discussion of religious problems. In addition, the many Roman Catholics in England were being persecuted and looked to More as the outstanding example of the separation of a man's obligation to his state from his duty to his church. Sir Thomas More was also an early proponent of freedom of speech in Parliament, an issue which was becoming more important, during the last years of Elizabeth's reign. Also, even though she was old, the queen had named no successor. The disillusion and dissatisfaction among the English was demonstrated by the Earl of Essex's rebellion in 1601. Although no definite reason for increased interest in More's life can be determined, those possibilities mentioned above must be considered.

The sources of the play are, for the most part, fairly obvious. Most of the first section and part of the last section are taken, with very little change, from Edward Hall's

English Chronicles. There is a short play which is a combination of two plays: Lusty Juventus and The Disobedient Child. Aside from these specific sources, most of the rest of The Booke of Sir Thomas Moore is taken from common knowledge of More.

Finally, perhaps the only way to interpret this play is as an example of the importance of order in Elizabethan society. Frequent references to the importance of order reinforce such an interpretation. Although More is shown as a wise, good man, he must be punished because he refuses to obey the king, who is God's agent on earth. In spite of such an interpretation, The Booke of Sir Thomas Moore, does not rise to the potential of its material.

## INTRODUCTION

The only known manuscript of The Booke of Sir Thomas Moore is a confused one in the British Museum. Five different handwritings can be distinguished, along with alternate versions of several scenes. The play itself has been the subject of numerous scholarly papers, but these papers have been limited to three areas of discussion. The most prominent area of disagreement has involved the question of whether Shakespeare wrote certain parts of the work, specifically a long speech in the first part of the play. A. W. Pollard and Samuel Tannenbaum were the two most vociferous proponents of the opposing sides of this question,<sup>1</sup> but there were others, most of whom agreed with Pollard in claiming Shakespeare's authorship. Among them were R. W. Chambers and Caroline F. Spurgeon.<sup>2</sup> It is this dispute that most scholars call to mind in connection with the play.

There is also some question concerning the date of the play, with dates as early as 1586 and as late as 1605 being suggested.

<sup>1</sup>See A. W. Pollard, Shakespeare's Hand in Sir Thomas More, (Cambridge, 1923) and Samuel Tannenbaum, "More about The Booke of Sir Thomas More," PMLA, XLIII (1928), 767-778.

<sup>2</sup>For a survey of the various issues involved in this and other problems concerning the play see R. C. Bald, "The Booke of Sir Thomas More & Its Problems" in Shakespeare Survey; An Annual Survey of Shakespearian Study & Production, 2, ed. Allardyce Nicoll (Cambridge, 1949), pp. 44-61.

A compromise date of 1601 seems to be the closest that anyone has gotten to settling this dispute. This decision is based primarily on the fact that Essex's rebellion took place in 1601, and such a date for the play would explain the censor's comments.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, some minor disagreement has developed over the question of whether the play was ever actually produced. Most people seem to agree, and rightly so, I think, that the play was never presented. Apparently, only one man, W. J. Lawrence, has claimed that the play was presented on the Elizabethan stage.<sup>4</sup>

Closely allied to the last two questions mentioned is discussion of the censor's actions. There is little disagreement on this topic, but it is one which has taken up some space in scholarly discussions of The Booke of Sir Thomas Moore. The censor's objections were centered mainly on the insurrection scenes of the first section and those sections where strong dislike of aliens was expressed.<sup>5</sup>

Although I do not feel qualified to discuss or attempt to solve any of the above disputes, there are several other areas where discussion is needed. There has been very little written

<sup>3</sup>See The Book of Sir Thomas More, ed. W. G. Greg (Oxford, 1911) pp. xix-xx and Bald, pp. 51-54.

<sup>4</sup>See Bald

<sup>5</sup>See E. M. Albright, Dramatic Publications in England, 1580-1640, (New York, 1927), pp. 128-139, and Greg, pp. x-xvi.



concerning the play itself, and this paper will attempt to do something along that line. As a kind of background I shall discuss first the question of why a play would be written about Sir Thomas More during the latter part of the sixteenth century. Then I shall attempt to survey the sources used in the play and the changes, if any, made by the author of the play. Finally, I shall discuss and try to answer the question of what the play is intended to mean and whether it is successful in this aim.



## CHAPTER I

### Possible Reasons for Interest in Sir Thomas More During the Last Years of Elizabeth's Reign

The Booke of Sir Thomas Moore was written sometime during the last decade of the sixteenth century or the first few years of the seventeenth century. During this period, it is said, there was a general revival of interest in More,<sup>1</sup> which, on the face of it, seems almost incredible. Why would Elizabethans in an apparently anti-Catholic country be interested in a man who died for his Catholic beliefs, beliefs which would not permit him to accept two of the major cornerstones of Elizabeth's establishment: the supremacy of the sovereign and the legitimacy of the queen herself? The answer is not quite as difficult to find as might first appear.

Not all Englishmen in Elizabeth's time were as satisfied with the Anglican Church as is popularly thought today. The famous Elizabethan settlement had done little more than establish the supremacy of the ruler in ecclesiastical matters; the church was viewed simply as a part of the commonwealth. This attitude can be seen clearly in the Homily Against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion with its affirmation of the rights and privileges of the sovereign, who is seen as God's

<sup>1</sup>William Shakespeare, the Complete Works, ed. Charles J. Sisson (New York, 1953), p. 1235.

agent. As J. W. Allen expresses it; ". . . the conception of the church is political and evidently not religious. . . . It refers to the need for order in society, to the sense that rebellion is the greatest of crimes against one's neighbors; it refers, if you will, to the need of union in religion. . . . What it does not refer to is the need for religious truth. Religion is conceived of as a function of social order; and such a conception could satisfy no religious man." The church was intended as a kind of watershed for the many types of English Protestantism; as a result, "it may be fairly said that the Elizabethan church had no definite doctrinal position, no distinctive theology, no law that anyone could ascertain for certain and very little either of discipline or order." As might be expected, many Englishmen were dissatisfied. Some Anglicans attempted to force the idea that the Anglican Church had Divine Authority. Others, who became known as Puritans, wanted to abolish most of the ritual and Catholic aspects of the church. The foundation was laid for a dispute that was to disrupt England for many years to come.<sup>2</sup>

Caught up in the center of this controversy were the Roman Catholics of England, most of whom wanted to be assimilated quietly into the life of their country. They could not give up their allegiance to the Pope because doing so would violate

<sup>2</sup>J. W. Allen, A History of Political Thought in the Sixteenth Century (London, 1928), pp. 179-182.

their belief in the separation of secular power from that of the Church; yet they wanted to remain loyal Englishmen. Their "prototype and protomartyr" was Sir Thomas More. It was More who had eloquently proclaimed the meaning of the Papacy, while at the same time attempting to prove his loyalty to the king in secular matters. English Catholics of Elizabeth's time wished to make the difference between the two beliefs very clear. They wanted the question of religion to be dealt with as an issue separate from politics. Most of them accepted Elizabeth as queen, but, like More, they held to their concept of freedom of conscience. Unfortunately for them, Rome could not, or would not, understand their dilemma.<sup>3</sup>

In 1570 the Pope declared that Elizabeth was not the rightful occupant of the English throne. This decree was apparently intended to free English Catholics from any sense of responsibility towards her. Ten years later the first Jesuits, supported by Philip III of Spain, arrived in England. While they preached a temporary acceptance of Elizabeth as queen, they also emphasized the doctrine that "rulers who displeased the Church ought to be destroyed by their subjects."<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, the Jesuits failed in their attempts to stir up rebellion. Ironically, they did succeed in making the life of the English Catholics more difficult. Catholics all over the

<sup>3</sup>H. R. Trevor-Roper, "Sir Thomas More and the English Lay Recusants" in Men and Events: Historical Essays (New York, 1957), p. 91.

<sup>4</sup>Trevor-Roper, p. 94.

country were placed under strict surveillance. In 1591 and 1593 religious restrictions were extended; under the 1593 act of Parliament Catholics could not come closer than five miles to a town; and in some cases children of Catholics were forced from them.<sup>5</sup> In spite of the harshness of their lives in England these Catholics became more adamant in their opposition to foreign influence, whether that influence was from Rome or from Spain. It is not surprising that these people, and they were many,<sup>6</sup> looked to Sir Thomas More, a "liberal Catholic" in the eyes of Rome,<sup>7</sup> as the personification of their beliefs.

Because of the persecution of the Catholics, as well as the dissatisfaction with the Anglican Church, more and more voices were raised for toleration. It does not matter that many who spoke out only wanted the right to have their views accepted as the correct ones and did not really want freedom of religion for all groups. The important fact is that the question was being discussed,<sup>8</sup> and the interest in More could simply be a reflection of the concern.

The religious controversy was not the only one during the last years of Elizabeth's reign. One important debate con-

<sup>5</sup>J. B. Black, The Reign of Elizabeth, 1558-1603 (Oxford, 1936), p. 355.

<sup>6</sup>Black quotes estimates ranging from 120,000 to 1,000,000 (p.374).

<sup>7</sup>Trevor-Roper, p. 91.

<sup>8</sup>Allen, p. 209.

cerned the limits of freedom of speech in Parliament. In 1523 More as Speaker of the House of Commons had defined those limits in a speech directed to Henry VIII:

It may therefore like your most abundant grace, our most benigne and godly kinge, to giue to all your comons heare assembled your most gracious licens and pardon, freely, without doubte of your dreadfull displeasure, euery man to discharge his consciens, and boldly in euery thing incident among vs to declare his advise; and whatsoeuer happen to any man to say, that it may like your noble maiestye, of your inestimable goodnes, to take all in good parte, interpreting euery mans wordes, howe vnconingly soeuer they be couched, to proceed yeat of good zeale towards the profit of your realme and honor of your royall person . . .<sup>9</sup>

More did not ask a good deal in the way of freedom of speech, but his statement on the subject was apparently the first of its kind in the English Parliament.<sup>10</sup>

Between the time of More's speech and the beginning of Elizabeth's reign the issue was not much discussed. However, at the beginning of her rule the question of how much freedom Parliament should have became more and more discussed. Exactly seventy years after More's pronouncement Elizabeth was forced by her parliament to reaffirm those very rights that he had spoken for. This affirmation was the beginning of an expansion of the conception of Parliamentary freedom of speech, for "in the next thirty-five years radical leaders taught successive assemblies to construe freedom of speech as a right

<sup>9</sup>William Roper, The Life of Sir Thomas Moore, knight (London, 1935), p. 16.

<sup>10</sup>J. E. Neale, Elizabeth I and Her Parliaments (London, 1957), p. 250.



to initiate policy, whether by bill or motion."<sup>11</sup> Thus, the fact that More was, in a sense, a pioneer in an issue which greatly concerned the Elizabethans could be another partial explanation of the interest in him.

There was another issue which could have drawn the eyes of Englishmen of Elizabeth's time to the period of Sir Thomas More's life. The queen was growing old in the 1590's; she had named no heir; and her long-time secretary, Lord Burleigh, was no longer young. "There was no obvious person who could transmit the established concepts of government into the new age."<sup>12</sup> Above all, Elizabethans feared the chaos and disorder that might develop after the queen's death. She epitomized all the glory and order of England. They did not know what might happen to their country when she was gone.<sup>13</sup>

Quite naturally, their thoughts would turn to the time when the problem of succession had arisen, to the time of Elizabeth's father's reign. Henry's declarations and his will were causing most of the trouble in determining his daughter's successor. Four pronouncements had set up four different lines of succession, but attention centered on three people as possible successors to Elizabeth: James VI of Scotland, Arabella Stuart, and the Infanta of Spain. In spite of the obvious concern of

<sup>11</sup>Neale, pp. 249, 435.

<sup>12</sup>Joel Hurstfield, "The Succession Struggle in Late Elizabethan England" in Elizabethan Government and Society; Essays Presented to Sir John Neale, ed. S. T. Bindoff et al. (London, 1961), p. 370.

<sup>13</sup>E. M. W. Tillyard, The Elizabethan World Picture (New York, n.d.) pp. 8, 16.

the English people, their queen would permit no open discussion of the problem. Surely the reasons for her action and inaction stemmed from the perilous days before she was secure on her throne; she wanted none of the plotting and hopes for her death that had occurred in similar situations when the heir to a throne became impatient for his inheritance.<sup>14</sup> Since her people were not permitted to discuss the immediate problem, the next best thing they could do was return to the time when it all began. Therefore, what was more natural than an interest in Henry's first divorce and his subsequent marriage to Ann Boleyn?

Elizabeth's failure to name an heir also underscored the growing disillusionment and questioning of Englishmen. After all, Elizabeth has been on the throne for many years. The abortive rebellion of the Earl of Essex in 1601 in many ways symbolized the very real problems with an aging queen. "When Essex died he was only thirty-three and Elizabeth sixty-seven - a contrast in years that suggests . . . the perennial conflict between youth and crabbed age."<sup>15</sup> The main difference between this particular conflict and the more general one which youth must win was, of course, the fact that age had the weight of the throne behind it.

<sup>14</sup>Hurstfield, p. 372.

<sup>15</sup>Black, p. 373.



Also important in any discussion of More was the fact that Elizabeth was secure in her throne. In spite of disillusionment most Englishmen would have been horrified at any suggestion of rebellion to remove their queen. Just as Essex's attempt failed miserably because, among other things, there was no popular support for it, so there was no probability that the memory of Sir Thomas More's life and death would inflame the emotions of the people.

Finally, and possibly most important in this discussion is the fact that Sir Thomas More was a towering figure in Renaissance humanism. This man, this friend of Erasmus, was the pride of the England of his day. His humanity and kindness were well-known through the several biographies of him. His Utopia was praised throughout Europe. Perhaps Englishmen of Elizabeth's time recognized this fact and felt that they could not ignore a man with such qualities, regardless of how his life had ended.

As is obvious, there can be no definite conclusion concerning the reasons for an interest in More's life. The question is as complex as the time itself was. Perhaps that observation is the most conclusive one to be made on the subject. There was no simple answer to life, and there is no simple way to find the answers to our questions concerning the people and events. The most that can be done is to recognize the possibilities and attempt to draw conclusions from them.

## CHAPTER II

### Sources

In order to understand the play more fully it is necessary to discuss briefly the sources and the changes made in them. It is generally assumed that Edward Hall's Chronicles provides the major source especially for the first and last parts of the play. Although the "ill-May-day" episode and the events surrounding More's death were well-known, the wording of Hall's work leaves little doubt that it was the major source.

According to Hall the aliens in London were rapidly becoming more and more unbearable during the spring of 1517, for "they disdained, mocked and oppressed the Englishmen." He goes on to tell the story of one Williamson, a carpenter, who bought two doves in Cheapside, but had them taken away from him by a Frenchman. When Williamson protested, the Frenchman went to the French Ambassador and had the carpenter arrested.<sup>1</sup>

The opening episode of the play is almost identical to Hall's account. The scene begins with a carpenter named Williamson following a Frenchman who has a pair of doves in his hand. The carpenter stops Caveler, the Frenchman, and the following exchange takes place:

<sup>1</sup>Edward Hall, Hall's English Chronicles, ed. Sir Henry Ellis (London, 1809), p. 586.

Cave. Follow me no further; I say thou shalt not have them.

Wil. I bought them in Cheapside and paide my monie for them.

Sher. He did, sir, indeed; and you offer him wrong, bothe to take them from him, and not restore him his monie neither.

Cave. If he paid for them, let it suffice that I possesse them; beefe and brewes may serue such hindes; are piggions meate for a coorse carpenter?

Lin. It is hard when Englishmens pacience must be thus jetted on by straungers, and they not dare to reuendge their owne wrongs.

. . . . .

Geo. Let vs step in, and help to reuendge their iniurie.

Bard. What art thou that talkest of reuendge? My lord ambassadour shall once more make your Maior haue a check, if he punishe thee not for this saucie presumption.

Will. Indeed, my lord Maior, on the ambassadours complainte, sent me to Newgate one day, because (against my will) I tooke the wall of a stranger . . . .<sup>2</sup>

Hall continues his chronicle by telling of a man named John Lincoln who wrote a bill of complaint against the aliens. He first attempted to have a Dr. Standish read it during the church services on the Monday preceding Easter, but the minister refused. According to Hall, a Dr. Bele agreed to read the complaint, which is quoted in full. Its major point is

<sup>2</sup>The Booke of Sir Thomas Moore in The Shakespeare Apocrypha, ed. C. F. Tucker Brooke (Oxford, 1918), I, i, 21-34, 45-54. All quotations from the play in my text are from this edition.

"That the alyens and straugiers eate the breade from the poore fatherles chyl dren, and take the liuyng from all the artificers, aand the entercourse from all merchauntes, whereby pouertie is so muche encreased that euery man bewaileth the misery of the other, for crafter me be brought to beggery and merchauntes to nedynes . . . ." <sup>3</sup> Hall's account is dramatised almost verbatim in the play, while the complaint which Lincoln reads is exactly the same as that quoted by Hall.

In scene three of act one there is a discussion among several noblemen concerning the aliens. Sir Thomas Palmer mentions two incidents that have taken place:

Yet Sherwin, hindred to commence his  
suite  
Against De Bard by the Ambassadour,  
By supplication made vnto the king,  
Who hauing first entic'de away his wife,  
And gott his plate, neere woorth the foure hundred  
pound,  
To greeue some wronged cittizens that found  
This vile disgrace oft cast into their teeth,  
Of late sues Sherwin, and arrested him  
For monie for the boording of his wife.  
(11.16-24)

Sir Thomas goes on to say that when he attempted to solve the problem he was told by De Bard "That, if he had the Maior of Londons wife,/ He would keepe her in despite of any Englishe" (11.36-37).

Hall tells exactly the same story concerning a Lombard named Frances de Bard and an unnamed Englishman. He also relates a conversation between De Bard and Sir Thomas Palmer,

<sup>3</sup>Hall, p. 587.

which is almost identical to the one related above.<sup>4</sup>

The Chronicles tells of the decision of the people of London "that on May daye next, the citie would rebelle & slaye all Aliens, in somuche as diuerse straungers fled oute of the citie." The Lord Chancellor, the Mayor, and the Aldermen heard of the plans and set a curfew for the city which stated that no one should be out of his house between nine o'clock in the evening and seven o'clock in the morning. In spite of this precaution a mob did gather and soon began to get out of hand. They ran to the jails and released some of the prisoners. "Thus they ranne a plump thorow saint Nycholas Shables, & at saynct Martyns gate, there met with them Syr Thomas Moore and other, desyringe theym to go to their lodgynges: And as they were intreatyng, and had almost brought them to a staye," stones and bats were thrown from St. Martin's. The riot continued until about five o'clock in the morning when the Earls of Shrewsbury and Surrey arrived with arms "but or they came all the ryot was ceased, and many taken."<sup>5</sup>

Only the punishment of the offenders remained. Thirteen men were executed almost immediately. On May 7 more doomed men were taken to their place of execution. Among them was John Lincoln, who was executed first. As the ropes were placed around the necks of the others, word came from the king to

<sup>4</sup>Hall, p. 587.

<sup>5</sup>Hall, pp. 588-589.



"respite execution." The king had postponed, but not cancelled, the sentence. Several officials of the city of London appealed to the king for clemency. Henry would not give them an answer, but sent them to his Lord Chancellor. This audience was held in the presence of the king at Westminster Hall on the twenty-second of May. Because of the combined appeal of the Mayor, the aldermen, and the prisoners themselves "the kyng pardoned them al."<sup>6</sup>

The play is remarkably accurate concerning the cause of the outburst. There is one minor addition in the person of Doll, Williamson's wife, but the significant changes come in the presentation of More's role during the riot. In the play he, and he alone, is responsible for the end of the uprising. The mob will listen to no one else, and his speech is a magnificent defense of order. In fact, parts of it seem to be based directly on the well-known Elizabethan Homily Against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion. The homily states that "such subjects as are disobedient or rebellious against their princes, disobey God, and procure their own damnation."<sup>7</sup> More tells the mob that "twere no error, yf I told you all/ You wer in armes gainst your God Himself" (II, iv, 118-119). He goes on to say in his own way exactly what the Homily expresses:

<sup>6</sup>Hall, pp. 590-591.

<sup>7</sup>Homily on Rebellion and Wilful Disobedience in Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed to be Read in Churches in the Time of Queen Elizabeth, (Philadelphia, 1859), p. 591. My observation. Also noted by E. M. W. Tillyard, Shakespeare's History Plays (New York, 1946), pp. 109-111.

For to the king God hath his offyce lent  
 Of dread, of justyce, power and comaund,  
 Hath bid him rule, and willd you to obay;  
 And, to add ampler maiestie to this,  
 He hath not only lent the king his figure,  
 His throne and sword, but gyuen him his owne name,  
 Calls him a god on earth.

(II, iv, 122-128)

One comparable passage in the homily is as follows: ". . . all kings, queens, and other governors are specially appointed by the ordinance of God. . . . so doth God himself. . . sometime vouchsafe to communicate his name with earthly princes; terming them gods. . ." <sup>8</sup>

Another change is seen in the fact that the Sir Thomas More of the play is solely responsible for the king's pardon of the rioters. When he quiets the mob, he gives his word that he will recommend clemency to the king: ". . . if you yeeld yourselues, no doubt what punishment you in simplicite haue incurred, his highness in mercie will moste graciously pardon" (II, iv, 173-176). Although More is not shown asking the king's mercy, the Earl of Surrey, upon delvering the king's pardon, states that

Sir Thomas More humbly vppon his knee  
 Did begge the liues of all, since on his woord  
 They did so gently yeeld: the king hath graunted it,  
 And made him Lord High Chauncellor of England,  
 According as he woorthily deserues.

(III, i, 148-152)

The last two lines of Surrey's speech reflect another change in history. According to the play More was knighted, made a

<sup>8</sup>Homily, pp. 591, 592



member of the Privy Council, and named Lord Chancellor as a direct and almost immediate result of his handling of the May-day rebellion. He actually played a minor part in the incident, and his rise to power came about in a different way. According to Roper the king had long recognized More's ability and had sent him on several missions, but it was not until an incident involving a tax on a ship belonging to the Pope that Henry would not "from thenceforth be induced any longer to forbear his service. Att whose first entry thereunto, he made him mayster of the requests (hauing then no better room void) and within a moneth after knighte, and one of his privy Councell." In 1521 he was named "thresurer of the exchequer." More did not receive the Great Seal of the Chancellorship until October of 1529.<sup>9</sup>

The purpose of these changes in the first part of the play is obvious. By placing More in a more central position the writer or writers give him much more dramatic importance and also immediately establish him as a friend of the poor. The acceleration of his rise also adds to the dramatic intensity of the opening scenes, as well as balancing his later fall. The addition of the speech on order establishes him as a friend and defender of the state and, consequently, makes him more attractive to Elizabethans, who, as has been mentioned, were imbued with the idea of upholding the so-called natural order of the universe. In other words, More is almost

<sup>9</sup>William Roper, The Life of Sir Thomas More, knight (London, 1935), pp. 9-11, 39.

immediately presented as a man who is loyal to his sovereign, again setting the stage for later events. This speech could, of course, also help to dispel any fears the censor might have of allowing the presentation of such a play.

Most of the incidental scenes in the second part of the play are apparently from the common stock of stories concerning More. However, one episode is usually associated with the Protestant Thomas Cromwell in Fox's Acts and Monuments.<sup>10</sup> This scene, in Act III, scene ii, concerns a commoner brought before More for a minor violation of the law. More discovers that the man has not cut his hair for three years and orders him to do so immediately.

Only one other episode in the middle section of the play needs to be mentioned here. The play presented in Act IV, scene i, is identified as an adaptation of two interludes, Lusty Juventus and The Disobedient Child.<sup>11</sup> Passages from the two works are intertwined, and the only changes made are additions which refer specifically to wit and wisdom. For example, the Prologue of The Disobedient Child begins with these lines:

Now, forasmuch as in these later days,  
Throughout the whole world in every land,  
Vice doth encrease, and virtue decays,  
Iniquity having the upper hand;

<sup>10</sup>Brooke, p. liv. Brooke refers to the 1684 edition, which I have been unable to obtain; the incident is apparently not in those editions to which I have had access.

<sup>11</sup>Brooke, p. liv.

We therefore intend, good gentle audience,  
A pretty short interlude to play at this present:  
Desiring your leave and quiet silence  
To show the same, as is meet and expedient.<sup>12</sup>

The Mariage of Witt and Wisedome begins with the same lines,  
but there is an addition of four lines which say

It is called The Mariage of Witt and Wisedome,  
A matter right pithie and pleasing to heare,  
Wherof in breef we will shewe the whole summe;  
But I must be gon, for Witt dooth appeare.  
(IV, i, 170-173)

The play then moves immediately to lines from Lusty Juventus  
which are here assigned to the character named Witt:

In a herber green asleep where as I lay,  
The birds sang sweet in the middes of the day;  
I dreamed fast of mirth and play:  
In youth is pleasure, in youth is pleasure.<sup>13</sup>

From this point on entire sections of scenes from Lusty Juventus serve as the major part of The Mariage of Witt and Wisedome. Where Juventus is faced by Hypocrisy and Abominable Living, Witt must content with Inclination and Lady Vanitie, but their words are the same. Only the part which Sir Thomas More takes seems to be original, although the idea behind it is the same as that expressed by the Good Councill of Lusty Juventus. More says,

Oh. . Witt, thou art nowe on the bowe hand,  
And blindely in thine owne oppinion doost stand  
I tell thee, this naughtie lewd Inclination  
Does lead thee amisse in a very straunge fashion:  
This is not Wisedome, but Lady Vanitie;  
Therefore list to Good Councill, and be ruled by me.  
(IV, i, 258-263)

<sup>12</sup>in Dodsley's Old English Plays, ed. W. Carew Hazlitt (London, 1874), vol. II, p. 278.

<sup>13</sup>in Dodsley's Old English Plays, vol. II, p. 46.

Witt questions Good Councell who repeats that the young man is making a fool of himself. Here the play is interrupted and is never resumed.

The last part of the play also contains material which was part of the tradition concerning More, but the account of his execution seems to be taken largely from Hall. His comments are centered on More's wit, which Hall seems to dislike. He tells of the request made by one of the officers of the Tower for More's "vpper garment for his fee." More gave the officer his cap, "saiyng it was the vppermost garment that he had." When More was on his way to his death, a woman stopped him and begged him to return some important papers which she had given to him while he was Chancellor. "He answered, good woman haue pacience a little while, for the kyng is so good vnto me that euen within this halfe houre he will discharge me of all busynesses, and help thee himselfe." As More mounted the steps to the scaffold he asked one of the Sheriff's men to help him up," and sayd, when I come doune againe, let me shift for my selfe aswell as I can." When the executioner kneeled before him to ask for the customary forgiveness, More replied, "I forgeue thee, but I promise thee that thou shalt neuer heue honestie of the strykyng of my head, my necke is so short. Also euen when he shuld lay doune his head on the blocke, he hauyng a great gray beard, striked out his beard and sayd to the hangman, I pray you let me lay my beard ouer the blocke least ye should cut it, thus w a mocke he ended his life."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Hall, pp. 817-818.

In the play More is stopped by a woman as he is being taken to the Tower:

Wo. Now, good Sir Thomas Moore, for  
 Christes deare sake,  
 Deliuer me my writings back againe  
 That do o concerne my title.  
 Moore. What, my olde client, are thou got  
 Hether too?  
 Poore sillie wretche, I must confesse indeed,  
 I had such writings as concerne thee neere;  
 But the king has take the matter into his owne hand;  
 He has all I had: then, woman, sue to him;  
 I cannot help thee; thou must bear with me.  
 (V, i, 33-41)

Immediately after above exchange is one with a "Gentleman" who asks for More's "vpper garment" and is given More's cap instead. When the man corrects More, the answer he receives is the same as the one quoted by Hall.

In Act V, scene iv, as More mounts the scaffold, he asks one of the sheriff's men to "lend me thy hand/ To held me vp; as for my comming downe,/ Let me alone, Ile looke to that myselfe" (ll.55-57). The hangman asks for More's forgiveness and receives More's request for forgiveness because, among other things, his neck is so short. Then More requests the hangman to "take heed thou cutst not off my beard . . ." (ll.111-112). But these are not his last words in the play.

He asks a question concerning the possibility of escape and answers it himself by noting that his soul will soon escape. In spite of all the guards, "I shall breake from you, and flye vp to heauen./ Lets seeke the meanes for this" (ll.122-126). His last words are not meant as any kind of mock:



Heere Moore forsakes all mirthe; good reason why;  
 The foole of fleshe must with her fraile life dye.  
 No eye salute my trunck with a sad teare:  
 Our birthe to heauen should be thus, voide of feare.  
 (ll. 131-134)

There is the important addition of the comment of the Earl of Surrey, who says, "A very learned woorthie gentleman/ Seales errour with his blood" (ll.135-136).

As in the first part of the play, the time sequence is speeded up somewhat. While More's dispute with the king actually took place over a period of several years, the events as related in the play seem to occur over the space of a few days or weeks. Once again dramatic necessity would justify such a change, for the concentration of events makes a much more forceful presentation for the stage. However, such speed also by-passes the possibility of any study of More's reasoning, as well as a detailed account of the issue involved. The writer of the play may have had good reason for his omission, and this possibility will be discussed in the next chapter.

Although most scholars trace much of the play back to Hall, it seems to me dangerous to assert as Charles J. Sisson has that no source other than the Chronicles and common knowledge was used.<sup>15</sup> Although the wording may be different, several biographies of More specifically Roper's life were written and in circulation during this period. I would be inclined to agree with C. F. Tucker Brooke when he says the "story of

<sup>15</sup>William Shakespeare, The Complete Works, ed. Charles J.

More's life and death was such common property in the reign of Elizabeth that it is unsafe perhaps to fix on any one authority."<sup>16</sup> There is no way to prove that these biographies were not used in some way, just as there is no way to prove beyond doubt that they were used.

As for the transformation of the sources into a play of merit, this is another and more difficult question, which can only be answered after a thorough study of the play. The play, like any work of art, obviously has its strong points as well as its weak ones, and which are strong and which weak can only be determined by consideration of the play as an entity in its own right. A consideration of these matters constitutes much of the remainder of this paper.

<sup>16</sup>p. liv.



### CHAPTER III

#### INTERPRETATION

According to A. W. Pollard The Booke of Sir Thomas Moore can be divided into three parts. The first deals with the ill May-day rebellion and More's subsequent rise to power; the second makes an attempt to establish his personality; and the third presents his conflict with the king. Each of the three, especially the "miniature anti-alien play" of the first part, can be considered separately from the others.<sup>1</sup>

In the first part of the play, through Act III, scene 1, the emphasis is on the grievances of the common people. Doll Williamson, her husband, and John Lincoln are much more in the forefront than is More himself. The proclamation mentioned in the last chapter states that "the hurt and damage greeueth all men" (I,i,152), and John Lincoln's cry of "must these wrongs be thus endured" (I,i,44) completely overwhelms the part More plays, at least until the end of the section.

More is seen only twice. First, he is introduced in what can only be viewed as an interruption of the action of the play as a practical joker who seems to know little or nothing about what is happening among the people of London. His

<sup>1</sup>Shakespeare's Hand in Sir Thomas More (Cambridge, 1923), pp. 3-4.

major function in this part of the play is as what Pollard sees as the deus ex machina; it is he who steps in and saves the townspeople, but interest is still centered on their plight. On the whole, it appears that the playwright got so involved with the issue he brought in as an introduction to More that he momentarily forgot his purpose.

Although the king never appears in the play, his presence is strongly felt. Significantly, this section emphasizes the nobility of the king and his apparent lack of knowledge concerning the dissatisfaction of his subjects. The nobles blame themselves for not informing him of the situation before it developed so dangerously, for had he known, "his gracious majesty/ Would soon redresse it" (I,iii, 69-70). More's speech to the mob, as has been mentioned, also dwells on the majesty and mercy of the king who "is clement, yf thoffender moorne" (II,iv,145). The purpose for these compliments is apparent and will become more important as the play is studied. Because there is never a word spoken against the king, the author of the play may have hoped to appease the censor. More important to the play is the fact that these early words serve to introduce the idea that the king is blameless, regardless of what happens.

The second part of the play is concerned solely with establishing More's humanity and his wit. There is not even as much unity as there was in the first section, simply unconnected and unrelated anecdotes concerning More. They seem

to have been chosen to show several facets of his character quickly and with little subtlty. For example, his learning is hinted at through the introduction of Erasmus as a visitor to his home. Yet even here the emphasis is on More as a practical joker when he attempts to deceive his guest. He instructs a servant who is dressed like the Lord Chancellor in this way:

You are Lord Chauncelor; dress your behavior  
According to my carriage; but beware  
You talke not over much, for twill betray thee:  
Who prates not much seems wise; his witte few scan;  
While the tongue blabs tales of the imperfitt man.  
Ile see if greate Erasmus can distinguishe  
Merit and outward cerimony.

(III,ii,35-41)

When More reveals himself, he demonstrates his wisdom in a rather pompous manner, considering the prestige of his visitor:

-Thus you see,  
My loving learned friends, how far respecte  
Waites often on the cerimonious traine  
Of base illitterat welth, whilst men of schooles,  
Shrouded in povertie, are counted fooles.

(III,ii, 197-201)

In this same scene there is a brief conversation with the Earl of Surrey which demonstrates, again with little subtlty, More's appreciation of poetry: "It is the sweetest heraldrie of art,/ That setts a difference tweene the tough sharp holl/ And tender bay tree" (III,ii, 222-224). His family is introduced, and More is shown entertaining the Lord Mayor and his wife. He even takes part in the interlude mentioned in the last chapter, the title of which, The Mariage of Witt and Wisedome, is obviously intended to refer to More himself.

This particular part of the play presents a "vivid portrayal of the management of an aristocratic household".<sup>2</sup>

Throughout this section More is shown as realizing the fleeting value of his position and power:

but Moore, the more thou hast,  
Ether of honor, office, wealth, and calling  
Which might accite thee to embrace and hugg them;  
And lett this be thy maxime, to be greate  
Is when the thred of hazard is once spun,  
A bottom great woond vpp greatly vndonn.-  
(III,ii,14-21)

The third section of the play is the crucial one, for here the conflict between Henry and More is brought out. With little warning some never-defined articles are brought from the king with the command that they are "first to be viewde,/ And then to be subscribed to" (IV,ii,73-74). More, of course, refuses to sign the articles; from this point on there is no question of the outcome. There are some brief, tender scenes between More and his family, but the execution scene is quickly presented. More's attitude throughout is one of serenity and good humor; his conscience is clear, and there is never any doubt in his mind concerning his course. He reiterates the fact that his days or prominence "were but painted dayes, only for showe" (IV,v,92).

The presentation of More in this play is a fairly accurate picture of the historical More, a man whom the writers obviously respect. He is wise, witty, but not overpowering. He is, however, a man who knows himself and what he must do.

<sup>2</sup>Brooke, p. liv.

In such a presentation it would be expected that his antagonist would be shown as being completely in the wrong.

Yet this is not the case. There is never any suggestion that the king is wrong in commanding More to go against his conscience. When the Chancellor refuses to agree to the articles, his action is viewed as a mistake. One of those present, the Earl of Surrey, makes this comment: "Tis straunge that my Lord Chauncellor should refuse/ The dutie that the lawe of God bequeathes/ Vnto the king" (IV,ii,114-116). More himself never speaks one word against the king; he goes to the Tower "With all submissive willingness" (IV,v,167). On the night before his execution he even goes so far as to say that the king is doing him a favor by having him executed:

To live in prison, what a life were that!  
The king (I thanke him) looves me more than so.  
To morrowe I shall be at libertie  
To goe even whether I can,  
After I have dispatche my business."  
(V,iii, 80-84)

It should be noted that More sees no other choice than a life in prison or death.

Even the members of his family never question the king; they beg him to submit. Roper, More's son-in-law, seems to speak for them all when he says, "The world, my lord, hath euer held you wise;/ And't shall be no distaste vnto your wisdomes,/ To yeeld to the oppinion of the state" (V,iii,91-93)

The common people bemoan the fact that "the best freend that the poore ere had" (V,i,43) must die, but they never speak out against the king or claim that More should not die.



Perhaps the best way to understand the meaning of the play is first to view another play which covers the same period in English history, Shakespeare's Henry VIII. Shakespeare's work presents the fall of the Duke of Buckingham, of Queen Katharine, and of Cardinal Wolsey. Archbishop Cranmer is also in danger at one point during the play, but is saved by Henry. The king is the only constant factor in the play; he is unscrupulous and determined to have his own way, but he is the king. Those who get in his way do so at their own expense, and they are well aware of the danger.

The first person to fall is Buckingham, who is described by the king in this way:

The gentleman is learn'd, and a most rare speaker;  
To nature none more bound; his training such,  
That he may furnish and instruct great teachers,  
And never seek for aid out of himself.

.....

Who was enroll'd 'mongst wonders . . . .<sup>3</sup> This man so complete,

Even this exemplary man must die because he displeased the king by questioning Henry's favorite, Cardinal Wolsey. And Buckingham never questions Henry. When he receives news that he must die, he replies,

my vows and prayers  
Yet are the king's; and, till my soul forsake,  
Shall cry for blessings on him: may he live  
Longer than I have time to tell his years!  
Ever beloved and loving may his rule be!  
And when old time shall lead him to his end,  
Goodness and he fill up one monument!

(II.1.88-94)

<sup>3</sup>The Famous History of the Life of King Henry VIII in The Works of Shakespeare, ed. Hardin Craig (Chicago, 1951), I,ii, 111-114, 118-119. All quotations from Henry VIII are from this edition.

Although Buckingham's death seems senseless, Queen Katharine's fate is portrayed as much less justified. She is a good woman who has served her husband and her king faithfully for years. Suddenly he decides to get rid of her, but she is more majestic than the king when she pleads with him: "what cause/ Hath my behaviour given to your displeasure/ That thus you should proceed to put me off,/ And take your good grace from me?" (II,iv,19-21).

Even Katharine, who has been so wronged by Henry, sends this message to him before she dies:

Remember me

In all humility unto his highness:  
 Say his long trouble now is passing  
 Out of this world; tell him, in death I bless's him,  
 For so I will.

(IV,ii,160-164)

The king can destroy any and all who oppose him because his will is the law of the land and is not to be questioned. Even if he is wrong, he is still the agent of God and must never be opposed. Cranmer's request that "God and your majesty/ Protect mine innocence or I fall into/ The trap is laid for me" (V,i,140-142) reflects this belief in the king's majesty.

Henry does protect Cranmer, and in the end of the play the king is still at the center of power with the Archbishop by his side. Cranmer's prophecy of future rulers of England includes a metaphor which can be applied as well to the idea of the power of a king. He compares the future queen as a phoenix that dies but regenerates itself in James I. So it



was with the authority and majesty of a crown and a natural order which no loyal subject could question.

Henry never appears on stage in Sir Thomas Moore, but his presence is always felt, and there is an obvious similarity between that play and Shakespeare's. Even though More is presented as a combination of wit and wisdom, he has the audacity to oppose and question the very system of order which he himself proclaimed. He tells the mob that their action "'tis a sin," that rising against the agent of God is as bad as rebelling against God himself:

What do you, then,  
Rysing gainst him that God himsealf enstalls,  
But ryse against God? what do you to your sowles  
In doing this?

(II,iv,128-131)

Just as Buckingham was nothing when compared to the king's wishes, so More's lone conscience is nothing when compared to the majesty of the throne.

One apparent problem or weakness of the play is the failure of the writer to define the issues involved. Included in this weakness is the omission of any confrontation with the king. Perhaps the issues are not made clear because "Elizabeth retained the ecclesiastical supremacy which More died rather than approve, and blind as these playwrights were to the difficulties in their path they had at least the wit to see what must inevitably happen if they let him argue his case."<sup>4</sup> This argument can be at least partially supported by the

<sup>4</sup>Pollard, p.3.

editor's obvious nervousness concerning the play and his apparently pointless demands for change.<sup>5</sup> No matter what the circumstances in Elizabethan England which would explain a revival of interest in Sir Thomas More, presentation of a favorable picture on the stage was quite a different matter from simply being interested.

It is also possible, however, that the play is not really intended to study the one specific conflict between More and Henry, but rather to present a report of what must happen to any man, no matter how good or wise, who opposed his sovereign. As has been mentioned, there is an obvious effort to present Henry as a worthy king. Again this attempt could be justified in light of the fact that he was Elizabeth's father and the writers could not afford to antagonize the queen. But it can also be explained in the same way as the plot of Henry VIII can be. Henry is the king and, as such, can not and must not be questioned. The fact that not even More's family or friends question Henry's motives or authority could also support this view.

As was mentioned in the first chapter, Englishmen were somewhat dissatisfied with their queen and with her failure to name an heir. It is possible that the writer of the play was attempting to demonstrate that the queen, regardless of her actions or lack of action, was still the queen. Much of

<sup>5</sup>See E. M. Albright, Dramatic Publications in England, 1580-1640, (New York, 1927), pp. 128-139.

the language and action of the play seems to support this view of the crown.

The "ill-May-day" section demonstrates what can happen when subjects resist their ruler. More himself explains it in this way when he asks the rioters what they will gain if they succeed:

What had you gott? I'll tell you: you had taught  
How insolence and strong hand should preuayle,  
How ordere should be quelld; and by this patterne  
Not on of you should lyue an aged man,  
For other ruffians, as their fancies wrought,  
With sealf same hand, sealf reasons, and sealf right,  
Would shark on you, and men lyke rauenous fishes  
Would feed on on another.

(II,iv,100-107)

And according to Elizabethan standards, in spite of More's mind and his geniality, he is making a tremendous mistake when he refuses to sign the articles. As the Earl of Shrewsbury says, "Errour in learned heads hath much to doo" (IV,ii,119). More's error is at least as bad as that of the members of the mob that he quelled, and he must be punished just as John Lincoln was. Lincoln appears to be the only member of the mob who finally recognizes his error, for as he is about to die he comments,

And now I can perceiue it was not fit  
That priuate men should carue out their redresse,  
Which way they list; no, learne it now by me,-  
Obedience is the best in eche degree:  
And asking mercie meekely of my king,  
I paciently submit me to the lawe;

(III,i,57-62)

Although the lives of the other rioters were saved, there is a difference between them and More. Just as Lincoln finally realizes his mistake and must die, so More must accept more

responsibility than any of the rioters because he obviously recognizes the enormity of his error from the very beginning. No one who delivered the speech he did could be ignorant of the issue involved. Since he cannot compromise his beliefs to this conception of the monarch, there is no choice. As the Earl of Surrey comments after More's execution, "A very learned woorthie gentleman/ Seales errour with his blood" (V,iv,135-136).

Of course, this interpretation can only be viewed through Elizabethan eyes and beliefs, not the beliefs of Henry's time. The Elizabethan Homily Against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion is quite specific in discussing a subject's duty even to an evil king: ". . . for subjects to deserve through their sins to have an evil prince, and then to rebel against him, were double and treble evil, by provoking God more to plague them."<sup>6</sup>

However, one major weakness of the play is the fact that More never seems to waver or wonder about his decision. His immediate reaction to the articles is to ask for some time to think about them before he decides about signing, but he is never shown doing this. The only scenes which give any indication of the sadness involved in More's decision are those which show his family. One of the most touching of these is in Act IV, scene iii when Lady More discusses a dream she

<sup>6</sup>Homily Against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion in Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed to Be Read in Churches in the Time of Queen Elizabeth (Philadelphia, 1859), p. 595.

has just had with her daughters and her son-in-law. In this dream she and her husband attempt to board the king's boat but are unable to do so; the stream carries them away from the boat until their boat is

Just opposite the Tower, and there it turnde  
And turnde about, as when a whirle-poolle sucks  
The circkled waters; me thought that we bothe cryde,  
Till that we sunck; where arm in arme we dyed.  
(11.22-25)

Although Roper attempts to laugh off her fears, he tells his wife that he too has "bin troubled with thy father/ Beyond all thought" (11.35-36).

One of the two times when More appears to be in anguish comes, not as a result of his doubts concerning his course of action, but because his wife does not seem to understand that he must do what he is doing. He tells the men who have come for his decision, "See, my lordes,/ This partner and these subiects to my fleshe/ Prooue rebelles to my conscience" (IV,v,138-140).

The only other time when More shows some emotion occurs when he is on the scaffold and suddenly asks the hangman, "ist not possible to make a scape from all this strong garde?" He recovers immediately and answers his own question with "it is./ There is a thing within me, that will raise/ And eleuate my better parte boue sight/ Of these same weaker eyes" (V,iv,115-119).

On the whole, though, this last section is rather cut and dried. In spite of the scenes with his family and some brief



incidents showing the sorrow of the people concerning More, the play moves rapidly toward its end. As a matter of fact, there is very little feeling of emotion on the part of the reader. The reasons for this lack of feeling are fairly obvious.

As was indicated in the last chapter, the writer of The Booke of Sir Thomas Moore, for the most part, simply pasted together various episodes drawn from More's life. He also missed much of the potential drama of the situation when he avoided scenes which would show More trying to reach a decision or at least recognizing, with some sorrow, what his course must lead to. As it is, More's good humour is almost too much to believe of a human being, although the presentation of it is, in some cases, enjoyable.

Perhaps this is the major problem of the play. Sir Thomas More is presented so much as the epitome of all the virtues of man that he loses his reality. Even his wit and his practical jokes seem somewhat forced because they represent such obvious attempts at humanizing him. More is bigger than life and although his one error is an enormous one, he shows so little doubt or anguish that the reader never feels this is a tragedy. A. W. Pollard's evaluation is perhaps the best one: "Although in the end the hero goes (manfully and merrily) to an unjust death with the full sympathy of the reader, or hypothetical spectator, the play is not a tragedy, hardly even a chronicle history."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Pollard, p. 1.



The only possible way to make some sense out of the play, to give it some unity is, as I see it, to interpret it as a demonstration of what happens when the order of the universe is disturbed in some way. This interpretation relates it to a number of important plays from Gorboduc (1562) to Troilus and Cressida (1601). The writers as we have seen, are less concerned with the motive or the problems of More himself than with providing a vindication of the Elizabethan establishment. More refused to acknowledge its greater order and died for an order he believed in. Time has vindicated the order that he rejected. Yet he was not wholly wrong, and Elizabeth's age could now honor him.

I cannot say that such an interpretation makes the play a good play, but it does help explain some of the apparent contradictions and omissions in the work. It is our loss that the author or authors of The Booke of Sir Thomas Moore were not up to the potential of his material, for, in spite of the political situation of the time, a play about Sir Thomas More could have been one of the outstanding works of any time.

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